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ABSTRACT

Emerging technologies and unstable financial issues are placing increasing demands on college administrators to provide visionary leadership. While numerous management frameworks have emerged in the past two decades, from Total Quality Management to transformational leadership, leaders should consider the concept of leadership wisdom in guiding their institutions. Wisdom has been recognized and respected throughout history as an intellectual virtue for leadership. Rather than merely having noble goals, wisdom is worthy deeds that have been put into action. Two actions that will indicate if a leader is wise are communication and decision-making, actions that require the majority of any leaders time. Since department, division, or college leaders should be role models of communication skills, they must promote attitudes and behaviors essential to open communication. Sharing information is another important element in open communication and can promote the success of any new idea or process. Although decision-making is rarely a one person process, it is critical that members of an institution trust that their leader will make the best decision for the institution and for them. While it takes a team to create success, ultimately it is the leader who must set the pace and be aware of and accountable for problems. (TGI)

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LEADERSHIP WISDOM:

BALANCING ON THE HIGH WIRE

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LEADERSHIP WISDOM: BALANCING ON THE HIGH WIRE

Institutions of higher education have become as vulnerable in the marketplace as America's corporations. Emerging technologies and unstable financial issues are placing an increased demand for administrators in institutions of higher education to provide leadership that is as visionary as those in the Fortune 500. During the decade of the 90's literature related to administration in higher education resembles the literature framework in America's corporate structures. As colleges and universities acknowledge these great challenges higher education administrators will be required to develop wisdom in their leadership abilities and strategies equal to corporate leaders.

Some of the corporate frameworks that have emerged during the recent two decades are Total Quality Management, Continuous Quality Improvement, Conflict Resolution, Strategic Planning, Institutional Effectiveness and Transformational Leadership. Anyone who has attended the workshops and implemented any of the above strategies can testify that they work. There are hundreds of corporations and institutions of higher learning that will testify that any one or all of the frameworks combined may not produce success. A Transformational Leader in a college is supposed to be able to juggle all of these balls while balancing on a high wire above the Grand Canyon humming Chariots of Fire. The goal is to reach the other side with new visions of increasing non-traditional funding, grants, international offerings, and a"Hero" medal. While the leader is crossing the Grand Canyon, institutions will be downsized, reshaped, molded, and remolded. The questions will be asked, "Are institutions of higher education doing better today than two, three, or five years ago or just doing it differently?" Perhaps the Transformational Leaders will incorporate an added element to the existing paradigm related to leadership. Maybe the astute and brave participants who will be approaching the new millennium will consider Leadership Wisdom with conscious deliberation.

PHILOSOPHERS DEVELOP THE FOUNDATION FOR WISDOM

Wisdom has been recognized and respected throughout history as an intellectual virtue for leadership. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Isocrates, and Erasmus define and identify qualities that indicate wisdom. Twentieth century Martin Buber, describes actions associated with wisdom that promote greatness and leadership. The writings of the philosophers regarding wisdom transcends the modern day processes of TQM and CQI. These philosophers collectively developed a way of thinking and behavior for great leaders.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) believed that wise men should have a broad knowledge base coupled with the ability to learn new and emerging complex information. Isocrates (436-338 BC) eluded to "Bench marking", looking for the best way. He wrote, "I hold that man to be wise is able by his powers of conjecture to arrive generally at the best course..." (Nash, 1968, p.73)

Erasmus (1466-1536) wrote that wisdom encircles the well being of the institution. His philosophy about wisdom is all encompassing and describes wisdom virtues desired of the greatest leaders. Erasmus describes wisdom as looking out for the good of your people above yourself, let the thought of honor win. "It is far better to be a just man than an unjust prince." (Nash, p.199) He also recognized the importance of being above reproach to wisdom, magnanimity, temperance, and integrity. He wrote, "If you want to make trial of yourself with other princes, do not consider yourself superior to them if you take away part of their power or scatter their forces; but only if you have been less corrupt than they, less greedy, less arrogant, less wrathful, less headstrong." (Nash, p.198) When a leader takes credit for a project without ownership; lets politics encumber a good and right decision; and when one does not listen, but becomes determined to have his or her own way; wisdom becomes impacted as well as trust in the leader. People desire to be led by wise leaders who give credit where credit is due and generously offer deserved praise.

It is recognized nothing is accomplished through good intentions or noble goals. Buber: The Existential Man wrote, "He whose deeds exceed his wisdom shall endure; but he whose wisdom exceeds his deeds shall not endure." (Nash, p. 457) Leaders in institutions of higher learning know that wisdom is more than noble goals, it is worthy deeds that have been put into action.

WISDOM LEADERS: COMMUNICATION AND DECISION MAKING

The two actions that require the majority of any leader's time are communication and decision making. Those two actions will indicate in a heart beat if the leader is in fact, wise. And, if in fact the leader is wise, he or she will regard communication and decision making as the heart beat of the position.

When one assumes a leadership position of a department, division, college or college district, they must be prepared to walk a new and different path that has no map. That is why leadership wisdom becomes the focus of thinking and a framework of actions. A wise leader will develop new visions, organize a dedicated team, cultivate communication skills and make astute decisions.

We do not question relationships, situations, or decisions when communication between or among people is positive and in agreement. However, when conflict does arise because of differing perceptions, there is a potential for the breakdown in communication. Covey describes these as "conflict knots." If you are the leader on the high wire and attempting to cross to the other side, if the rope you are walking on has knots, the journey may not be successful. The knots must be untied to smooth the path. Covey describes clearing communication lines and untying the knots. His process is simple: A + B = C. Attitude + Behavior = Communication. (Covey , 1992, p. 110)

Certain attitudes and behaviors are essential to clearing communication lines.

Attitudes:

I assume good faith: I do not question your sincerity or your sanity.

I care about our relationship and want to resolve this difference in perception. Please help me to see it from your point of view.

I am open to influence and am prepared to change.

Behaviors:

Listen to understand.

Speak to be understood.

Start dialogue from a common point of reference or point of agreement, and move slowly into areas of disagreement.

The leader of any department, division, or college should be the role model of communication skills. The purpose of communication is not whether what someone says coincides with what the leader thinks - but an appreciation their input is valued and respected. The wise leader promotes communication by those who think differently and there is trust and acceptance of varied ideas.

There are times when different ideas, feelings, and viewpoints can coexist within a group. There are also events that require the group to openly communicate and come to a consensus.

The other important element in open communication is that every piece of meaningful information is shared. One small deleted or missing piece of information can sabotage a decision or destroy a relationship. Missing information which was overlooked can be forgiven while purposefully withholding information creates a different reaction.

In any department, division, or college, to witness the primitive act of cannibalism, have someone announce a new initiative without the input of the stakeholders. Stakeholders must trust that their input is important in the decision making process. This one act of communication sharing can promote the success of any new idea or process. Communication prior to implementing new initiatives can identify the potential pitfalls. The new initiatives can be reviewed and perhaps an intervention can be added. The leader on the high wire would be wise to discuss what time of day is best to cross the Grand Canyon and consider if the sun will be on your back or in your eyes.

Decision making is rarely a one person process; however, when the leader must make a decision, the people in the institution will need to trust he will make the best decision for the institution and the people. Erasmus wrote that the leader will place what is best for the people and the institution at the forefront of any decision. Perhaps it is the ability to make difficult decisions that separate leaders from followers. We know that factors which impact our decisions are people, institutions, and the environment. It would seem some decisions can be yes or no; however, it would seem the more complicated and convoluted a decision the greater number of external factors are influenced by that decision.

We expect great leaders to have uncommon intuition and wise actions. Intuition is having a "gut feeling" about something. It can be meeting someone and having an intuition about whether you can or cannot work with them. While not scientific, intuitions are valuable and should certainly have consideration in decision making. If I am going to walk the high wire over the Grand Canyon and develop an intuition or "gut feeling" the set-up is not secure, one can be sure I will check it out.

CONCLUSION:

There is not a pathway toward successful visions built by one person; however, it is the leader who sets the pace for the department, division or institution. While there are very few truly great actions that occur with one person, it is the leader that can excite the people to move towards new horizons. It generally takes a group of dedicated and committed people who accompany the leader on the pathway toward success and a wise leader that respects the relationship with the people. While it takes a team to create success, ultimately it is the leader who must be aware and accountable for problems. It should be understood that when a problem is identified, the leader has first ownership. For example, if you are the leader on the high wire and notice the rope is loosely tied- it is a mute point to say someone else has a problem tying knots. The problem is immediately the person on the high wire. That is why the leader promotes and develops trust among a dedicated and committed team.

Denis Waitley wrote that wisdom was not inherited but developed slowly over the years. It has to be learned, nurtured, and practiced. Becoming wise is beyond formal education. George Bernard Shaw wrote that education changes one from cocksure ignorance to thoughtful uncertainty. The wise leader will respect that some decisions will always be made with thoughtful uncertainty.

Leadership wisdom has no fixed shape, guidelines, or protocol of what must be done for success. It does imply that a leader must accept imperfections; be resilient; have and trust intuitions; "be still" long enough to consider the essential information; and think beyond what has been done before.

Whether the leader is a Chancellor, President, Dean, Division or Department Chair the leadership they provide is limited only by how brave and wise they are. We truly have the opportunity to become conscious creators of the future of leadership in education. It takes only one cell to transform a body. It takes only one person to transform the organization. With wisdom as the foundation, your leadership should be a passion to challenge yourself and those around you to surpass the standards.

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